The timing of marriage and childbearing among rural families in Bangladesh: Choosing between competing risks


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Outline

- Introduction
- Data and Methods
- Findings
  - Socio-cultural supports for EM&C
  - Evidence of change
  - Growing sense of EM&C’s costs and risks
  - Perceptions of change, ambivalence and lack of consensus
  - Regret
  - Evolving gender norms revealed in marriage strategies
- Discussion
- Acknowledgements
- References
Introduction

- EM&C is associated with a wide range of negative social and health consequences: abuse of girl’s human rights, cause of mortality and morbidity during pregnancy, labor and delivery, premature births and rapid population growth.

- Lengthening the interval between generations will have a greater impact in reducing population growth.

- International agencies are now supporting large-scale interventions to delay marriage and child-bearing in Bangladesh.

- Many young, unmarried women have delayed their marriages and gained independent incomes and some measure of autonomy by working in the garment industry.
Introduction (continued)

- Based on qualitative research undertaken between 2002 and 2005 to understand the reasons for the persistence of EM&C in Bangladesh, to identify circumstances in which families deviate from EM&C, and to analyze the social dynamics behind changing marriage and childbearing strategies.
Data and methods

- Two villages in Rangpur District (northern Bangladesh) and one village in Magura District (west central region) with a total population of 3970.
- Data from a 2002 survey show that the mean age at marriage for married women 20-49 years of age in the three village sample was 14.2.
- Increased from 13.1 for women ages 45-49 to 15.1 for ages 20-24.
- Half of the women had their first child by the second year of marriage, and by 5 years of marriage 10% of women had not given birth.
- Based on 85 in-depth interviews with individuals (20 with men, 65 with girls and women) and 4 discussions with small groups of girls and women (2002 and 2005).
Data and methods (continued)

- Snowball sampling and prior knowledge of the villages to select study participants: recently married adolescent/young women and unmarried girls considered to be of marriageable age (ages 13 and over), close relatives of such young women, members of economically distressed households.
- Participants were briefed in advance about the nature of the interviews and provided oral consent.
- Interviews focused on norms, practices, and decision-making related to the timing of marriage and childbearing.
- Team of three female and one male Bangladeshi researchers.
Data and methods (continued)

- Combination of tape recordings and field notes from the interviews to generate written transcripts in Bangla, which were translated into English by independent local translators, and checked by the interviewers.
Table 1
Composition of individual and group interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual interviews (N = 85)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Key informants (female)*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unmarried adolescent girls/young women</td>
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<td>Married adolescent girls/young women</td>
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<td>Mothers of married and unmarried adolescent girls/young women</td>
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<td>Mothers-in-law of adolescent girls/young women</td>
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<td>Fathers of married and unmarried adolescent girls/young women</td>
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<td>Fathers-in-law of adolescent girls/young women</td>
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<td>Husbands of adolescent girls/young women</td>
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<td>Brothers of married and unmarried adolescent girls/young women</td>
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<td>Female group interviews (N = 4)</td>
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<td>N Participants</td>
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<td>Age range</td>
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*Three school teachers, a traditional birth attendant and a contraceptive depot holder.

*bFour mothers were also interviewed as mothers-in-law.
Findings

- Socio-cultural supports for EM&C
  - Most of the marriages described by study participants were arranged by parents.
  - The sexual desires of young men, along with the belief that wives should be several years younger than their husbands.
  - Sex outside marriage is considered immoral and shameful throughout most of Bangladeshi society, particularly for girls and women, and girls are seen as vulnerable to men’s predations once they reach menarche.
  - Poor parents are in a weaker position than better-off families with regard to their ability to protect daughters from premarital sex and scandal.
Findings (continued)

- Desire to reduce risk and uncertainty.
- Widespread belief that family planning methods can cause sterility in nulliparous women.

- Evidence of change
  - Many people articulated costs and risks of EM&C, especially negative health consequences, and many said that change in practice was occurring.

- Growing sense of EM&C’s costs and risks
  - Vast majority of study participants equated early marriage with early childbearing, which had a negative impact on health that many women never recovered from.
Findings (continued)

- Economic risks associated with health problems from EM&C: emergency caesarian deliveries which they saw as prohibitively expensive and feared might cause permanent weakness.
- People had been previously unaware of the health and economic risks associated with early marriage and childbearing.
- Most were aware of the statutory minimum ages at marriage for women and men: others in the village, own experience, television dramas, radio and television programs.
Findings (continued)

- Perceptions of change, ambivalence and lack of consensus
  - Many people directly stated that change was occurring, and some condemned past practices.
  - Lack of consensus regarding both actual practice and appropriate behavior.
  - Considerable disagreement within families and communities regarding the ages at which daughters *should* be married.
  - Disagreement as to whether education was an asset for a young woman in the marriage market and would result in higher versus lower dowry demands.
  - Some parents said they had faced criticism for keeping their daughters unmarried and others for marrying them off too young.
Findings (continued)

- Study participants often condemned past practices.

- Regret
  - Participants’ frequent spontaneous expressions of regret also suggest that perceptions regarding EM&C are changing.

- Evolving gender norms revealed in marriage strategies
  - Many participants talked about changing times, both spontaneously and when asked to compare current marriage norms and practices with those of the past.
Findings (continued)

- Many families in which parents decided to delay a daughter’s marriage but later caved in to pressures from suitors and their representatives, or to their own fears and anxieties regarding a sexual scandal and its social and economic repercussions.

- Decision-making in poor families
  - Several mothers-in-law married their sons off earlier because they needed an extra worker in the family, and prevailing ideas about the age gap between a bride and groom led them to choose very young daughters-in-law.
  - Impoverished parents sped up a daughter’s marriage in the hope that she would be better cared for in her in-laws home, or to reduce the number of mouths to feed in their own homes.
Discussion

- The study findings provide strong evidence that attitudes regarding EM&C are changing and more limited evidence that practice too is changing.
- Marriage strategies of the poor are above all economic strategies.
- Once they were married, many young women and their natal and marital families saw the specter of childlessness as a greater threat to their well-being than early childbearing.
- The health sector has clearly made progress in communicating the dangers of early childbearing among the rural people in this study.
THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION.